Genre and Interpretation

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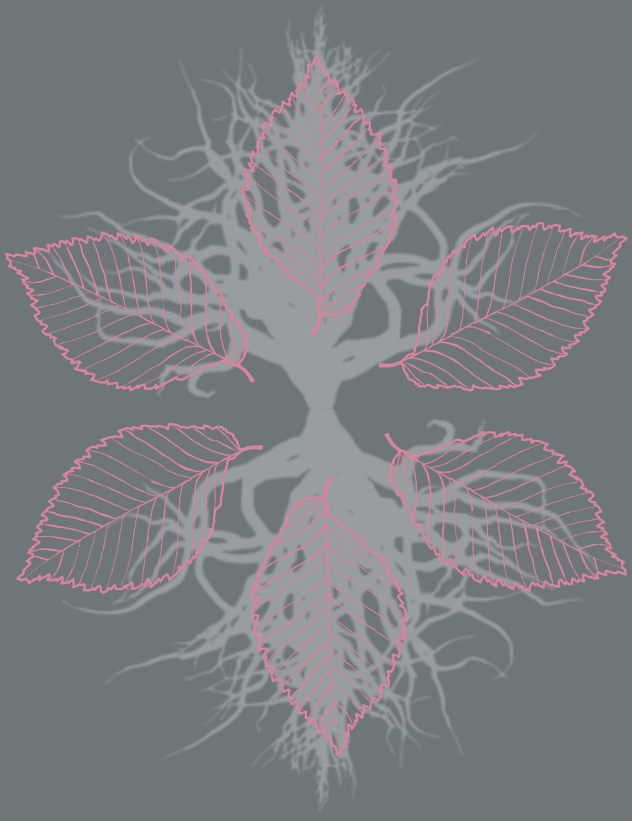

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Copenhagen Studies in Genre 2

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READING GENRE

GENRE AND INTERPRETATION

Sune Auken

LIKE OTHER SCHOLARS prone to empiricism, I am somewhat allergic to the metaphor of reading "between the lines" of a text. Everyone knows, of course, that this expression is merely a metaphor, that there is nothing between a text's lines other than a blank, white space. No primitive misunderstanding is here at stake. Nevertheless, the metaphor seems to function as an intellectual roadblock: it presents a catch-all phrase that sounds profound enough to justify interpretive claims, but does not actually provide any grounds for them.

The cognitive reality expressed in the metaphor is obvious. Many of the inferences we make when interpreting a text are not based solely on what is written in it. Even in the most basic examples—and sometimes in these even more than in other examples—we find that basic elements of the information communicated by a text are not actually present in the text's own wording, but depend on some sort of regulative, interpretative framework that involves the sender or author, the reader, and the text, as well as the cultural landscape within which all of these are embedded. Some of these inferences are textual, while others are not. Thus, for example, the textual relations described in Gérard Genette's transtextual trilogy (Genette, 1990; 1982/1997a, & 1987/1997b) are only parts of the story here, albeit very important ones. Genette is obviously right to include genre as one of his transtextualities—slightly disguised, of course, as one of several architextualities. Likewise, Schaeffer (1983) is right in pointing out that the architext differs from the rest of Genette's transtextualities by not establishing a paired relation between two concrete texts (the paratext and

Auken: "Genre and Interpretation": 154-183 in *Genre and*… 2015.

the text, the hypertext and the hypotext, etc). To this, however, one might add that it would be a misconstrual of the concept of genre—and even that of literary genre—to regard it as an exclusively textual phenomenon. In order to understand the role of genre in interpretation, we will need to perceive genre as a much broader phenomenon, active in though not confined to texts.[1]

Surprisingly, the available research in the relationship between genre and interpretation is somewhat limited. Though a number of studies have obvious implications for the relationship between genre and interpretation, actual studies within the field are few and far between. Both Fowler (1982) and Frow (2006) contain chapters on "Genre in Interpretation," but neither of these go very far. Fowler, in fact—influenced no doubt by the state of literary criticism in the early eighties—spends more time discussing validity in interpretation, agreeing with E.D. Hirsch, Jr., than he does actually discussing the role of genre in interpretation. (In fact, Hirsch himself, focused as he was on questions of interpretation, went significantly further than Fowler by analyzing how our understanding of an utterance to a great degree has to do with our generic conception of it (Hirsch, 1967, chapter 3). Seitel (2003) extends the discussion somewhat by identifying some of the central features of generic interpretation, world, structure of expectation, and thematic finalization; but he remains subdued in describing the actual, analytical interplay of genre and interpretation.

If we approach the subject from another angle, however, we find that generic concepts play an enormous role in any work of interpretation. A

1 One more qualification: I use genre as a key to understanding utterances because genre manifests existing cultural norms. From another angle—sociological or rhetorical—one might move in the reverse direction and use the generic traits of concrete utterances to understand broader cultural norms: "Genres […] open a window onto communicative norms shared by groups of people in certain situations." (Berg, 2011, p. 89) I regard the methodological discussions of whether genre interprets utterances through culture, or interprets culture through utterances, as exhilarating, vexing, and without end.

few classic titles from my own field suffice to demonstrate this: Ian Watt: *The Rise of the Novel* (Watt, 1957/1987), Northrop Frye: *Anatomy of Criticism* (Frye, 1957/1968), Wayne C. Booth: *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Booth, 1961/1991), or, more recently, Dorrit Cohn *The Distinction of Fiction* (1999), Michael McKeon (ed.): *Theory of the Novel* (2000) and David Seed (ed.): *A Companion to Science Fiction* (2008). All of these titles clearly depend on genre terms to describe the area of study. Two of them (Frye, 1957; Seed, 2008) even use generic terms to describe themselves ("Anatomy" and "Companion" respectively). What is more, genre and generic categories play all-important roles in the actual interpretations taking place across the different areas of the humanities. Within my own field, I think most of us would be hard-pressed to find an interpretation of an aesthetic utterance that is independent of generic categories. To some extent, this is so simply because it is hard to say anything at all without resorting to concepts of genre.

Accordingly, when taking the measure of existing genre theory, it is helpful to shift the focus from what has been said about genre and interpretation to what has been said about genre in general. This yields a much wider trove of useful analysis, as all extended studies of genre must eventually touch upon the interpretative force of generic structures. Indeed, a number of studies have yielded important insights into the relationship between genre and interpretation even though their primary aim is something else.[2] Some of these insights will play a central role in this article.

2 A very limited sample could include Jolles (1958), Jauss (1982), Genette (1992), Schaeffer (1983), Miller (1984), Briggs & Bauman (1992), Schryer (1993), Devitt (1993 and 2004), Freadman (1994 and 2002), Paré (2002), Frow (2006), Segal (2007), and Lamping (2009b). Being no great fan, I would hesitate to add Derrida (1980) to this list—though I am aware that others would do so eagerly.

INTERPRETING THROUGH GENRE

A common-sense interpretation of the relationship between genre and interpretation suggests two things: a) that one of the central aims of a generic interpretation is to decide into which class (genre) a given utterance fits, and b) that interpreting a given work for its genericity leads to a concentration on what it has in common with other texts, yielding an understanding of a text's typical character but not its individual character. Both these claims are expressed eloquently by Dieter Lamping. Discussing the central place of the concept of genre within criticism, Lamping says:

> Sie ist in der Sache darin begründet dass jeder literarische Text zumindest einer Gattung zugerechnet und insofern auch mithilfe zumindest eines Gattungsbegriffs beschreiben werden kann. Ein solcher Begriff bezeichnet allerdings nicht das an einem Text, was individuell und unverwechselbar ist, sondern das, was er mit anderen Texten derselbe Gattung gemeinsam hat. (Lamping, 2009b, XV)

Both claims are in fact very close to the truth. However, both are also quite inadequate if one wants to understand what actually takes place in generic interpretation. One must distinguish between two different kinds of interpretation. On the one hand, there is the kind of meaning-making that each of us carries out as we move through our everyday life. Though instantaneous—and, more often than not, forgotten mere seconds after it is made—this meaning-making is still amazingly complex and presupposes a high degree of cultural competence. On the other hand, we have the "professional" interpretation carried out in classrooms or in scholarly work: specialist work that attempts to unravel the intricate patterns of meaning (in the broadest sense of that word) in texts, cultural structures, or social situations.

This article deals mainly with the latter form of generic interpretation. Yet I will also have continual recourse to the former, since the patterns of meaning brought to light in scholarly interpretation depend greatly on pat-

terns that are known to us through our everyday experience. In fact, the meaning-making that takes place tacitly in everyday life is also present in scholarly interpretation. Yet its precise role is as difficult to unravel as it is habitual and tacit. For this reason, it is all too often described by appeal to the vague metaphor of reading "between the lines."

In most everyday cases, the attribution of an utterance to a genre is quite automatic. We do not need a lot of thought to know that we are entering a "meeting," seeing a "news broadcast," reading a "headline," or participating in a "conversation." Automatic though it may be, this process of genre identification nonetheless has a strong regulative influence on how we interpret a given utterance. We are keenly aware when particular utterances depart from the genre. For example, a newscast allows for different roles to be attributed to different people, such as the "reporter," the "anchorman," the "interviewee," and the "weatherman." Of these, only the role of "interviewee" allows a person to make utterances that fall within the genre of "political statement." The genre of the newscast is supposed to report and explain, not to persuade; the "interviewee" is part of what is reported, as are the political statements he or she makes, no matter how biased they may otherwise be. If political statements are made by someone in one of the other roles, they detract from the newscast as a whole, and we interpret it as less than fair and balanced.[3] Thus even a variation as minor as that of one person straying from his given role changes how we perceive

3 One important exception to this rule is that reporters and anchormen are allowed to make political statements if and only if these are so broadly shared by the viewers that they are wholly uncontroversial. "Democracy is good" or "corruption is bad" could be two such statements in a Western context; but if the main body of viewers and the anchorman are in agreement, much more radical statements can be made. Thus the pun above on the Fox News Channel's motto is not altogether fair, as there actually is agreement, to a large extent, between the channel and its viewers—even if some of the statements made in Fox newscasts appear outrageous to many other viewers.

the utterance drastically—even to the point of finding it faulty within the genre.

As even this limited example demonstrates, genres have a strong regulative influence on our interpretation of a given utterance or situation. This influence, however, is of a special nature, as regulations imposed by genre can be broken at a moment's notice or made the subject of manipulation or interpretation. Depending on the character of this break, it can lead either to an ingenious use of the genre, to a break between genre and utterance, or to a work that moves into, or even defines, an entirely different genre. Generic knowledge may not be a result of what is written "between the lines" on the lines as such; but all the necessary information certainly is not written on them either. What happens is that the text generates meaning by referring to or making a play on our structure of expectation (see below).

TWO COMMERCIALS

For a very obvious example, consider the following two car commercials, both very talented. One is a genuine advertisement; the other is a parody from the long-running Canadian satire program *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*.

In the genuine commercial,[4] advertising a BMW convertible, we see a well-dressed man hurriedly leave the house of a beautiful girl, enter his convertible, and race through Italian-looking streets nimbly dodging intimate pieces of clothing that scantily clad women let fall at him. Arriving at a church, he storms into it in order—we discover—to meet his bride who is apparently the daughter of a mob boss. He pulls out a white handkerchief and dries her tears. Then a text appears on the screen: "The new Series 3 convertible—It could save your life." The attractive groom, however, is not in the clear yet. The picture returns to the bride who, lowering the

4 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7IIxyX2hMY

handkerchief, discovers that it is actually a piece of white lingerie. Shock spreads through the gathering—and the commercial ends.

In the mock commercial, a completely different angle is chosen. It is a parody of a commercial for a Nissan X-Trail Bonavista, a car named after a town in New Foundland, Canada.[5] This commercial lets the salesman explain the virtues of the car in a parodic New Foundland dialect heavy with colloquialisms, and adds subtitles in a more common English.

This situation is taken up and intentionally overdone in the mock commercial.[6] We see a car dealership where a salesman busily chats up his customer in what appears to be a parody of the parodic New Foundland dialect from the original commercial. The customer informs the salesman that he is from Montreal—at which point the salesman changes the name of the car and slips into gibberish French, including the easily recognized sentence "Voulez-vous coucher avec moi?" The customer now informs the salesman that he is moving to Alberta for work. The salesman once again switches the name of the car, this time to "Ford MacMurray," and starts talking (and moving) like a redneck. When the customer remarks that he will be in Toronto for some time still, the salesman changes the name of the car once more and says, in a refined, snobbish accent, "The Rosedale. Now Margaret Atwood drove one of these to the film festival. I nearly dropped my latté"—with no coherence whatsoever between the first and second statements. The pair then goes out of focus, and a voice-over says: "At Nissan we'll use any regional stereotype to sell you a car!" As the pair comes back into focus, the salesman is in an overcoat speaking Inuit with the customer listening placidly.

Both of these commercials rely strongly on the viewer's anticipations for the genre. In the BMW ad, the single most important piece of presupposed knowledge is in fact the knowledge that we are dealing with a com-

5 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3m-y-qAbpL0
6 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OLyfA2l_PSw

mercial. Neither the sensuous story nor the joke ending signal that this is the case. Only the mention of the car just before the ending, and the role that swerving with the car plays in the story, refer us to the genre of the commercial. Yet from the moment when we know that we are dealing with a commercial, we also know that no matter what story it tells, and whether or not it says so explicitly, its aim is to sell us a car and so make money on us. Suspicious as this may sound when put so bluntly, there is actually nothing covert about the commercial.[7] It is an inherent characteristic of the commercial as genre that the sender wants something from the receiver. In the case of a commercial for a product, that something is money. The sender knows this, the receiver knows this, and what is more, they are both fully aware of one another's knowledge. In fact, the commercial probably could not work without this shared knowledge: the viewer would have a very hard time understanding that the point of the short film was to make him buy a certain kind of car.[8] This is true all the more given that the story told in the film actually undercuts the commercial's written message. The handsome man is not in fact saved from his mobster in-laws; the handkerchief/lingerie causes scandal to erupt anyway.

The intention to sell is squarely at the center of the second commercial, which is not so much a commercial as it is a sketch parodying a particular commercial and, by consequence, commercials of this kind. In a

7 This obviously does not mean that you cannot manipulate through genericity. Mark Antony's famous speech before the body of Caesar in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (2006) is wholly dependent on the genre of the funerary speech despite the fact that its intended effect—rousing the suspicions of the mob against the much-admired Brutus—is something quite different (Auken, 2013). Examples of real-life fraudulence through genre use are given in Frow (2006, pp. 100), and—inspired by Frow—in Auken (2011, pp. 123).

8 Thus the presuppositions involved in understanding the commercial match Amy Devitt's description of the "sales letter": "Based on our identification of genre, we make assumptions not only about the form but also about the text's purposes, its subject matter, its writer, and its expected reader. If I open an envelope and recognize a sales letter in my hand, I understand that a company will make a pitch for its product and want me to buy it." (Devitt, 1993, p. 575).

manner that is familiar for generic parodies, it uses the target genre's defining generic traits, but exaggerates them to the point of silliness. In this case, what was in the first commercial an unspoken assumption—that the sender wants to sell the receiver a car—is now overemphasized by having the salesman repeatedly perform a very obvious and very silly trick in order to sell the car in question. Beyond this generic parody, the sketch adds two more: a parody of car salesmen, plus the series of regional caricatures (or "stereotypes," as the "commercial" dubs them) that match the different car names. Despite its evident complexity, this structure is nonetheless part of a light genre (the "sketch"), and is easily interpreted by any viewer familiar with Western culture.

The sketch's complexity reveals itself, however, when it is taken out of its context in *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* and is posted in isolation on YouTube.[9] The new framing changes everything. As the comments to the clip make evident, a lot of viewers fail to recognize it as a parody. They simply take it to be a commercial. This is possible because a number of commercials employ exactly the same kind of stylistic techniques to make the fictive salesman, the company, the customer, or even the product look slightly silly in order to extract a laugh from the viewer. The operating assumption, I presume, is that the laugh itself will make the viewer remember the product, and possibly even develop positive feelings toward it.

These two examples make several things clear. First, even if the two pieces may ultimately fit into known genre categories ("commercial" and "sketch," respectively), they both employ generic patterns that differ widely from those usually associated with their respective genres, to the point where one piece, the sketch, is on the cusp of being mistaken for a member of another genre entirely, namely, that of the commercial. Second, an interpretation of these pieces in terms of their genericity need not invariably lead to an account of what they have in common with other utterances in

9 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hXy3Qm7QKU&NR=1&feature=fvwp.

their genres. Clearly both pieces would be next to incomprehensible for viewers who did not know the generic patterns that they bring into play—there is no fun in performing a regional stereotype for viewers who do not recognize what you are doing[10]—but when the different generic patterns do meet in the two pieces, they help shape much more singular structures.

Equally important, we can see that even if it is tacit to a large degree, the meaning-making involved in interpreting both of these two pieces has nothing to do with reading "between the lines" or any other kind of intellectual witchcraft. Both pieces make a calculated play on the viewer's horizon of expectation. The viewer—being a culturally competent member of society—*knows* from the outset what to expect of a "commercial" and a "sketch" respectively. This anticipation, however, need not necessarily be fulfilled. It can instead be the subject of counter-play, modification, or parody, thus activating the viewers' preexisting knowledge in the course of meaning-making of this specific utterance.

Finally, the above interpretations are usually made automatically by the viewer without any active reflection. Despite the fact that the inferences at issue take some effort to work out analytically, we do not experience the process of understanding the two pieces as requiring analytical effort. The inferences are tacitly made by every competent member of our culture—provided the framing is correct. We immediately recognize the world that each piece sets forth. We recognize each piece's rhetorical purpose (to make us buy cars/laugh), and we understand the complex inter-

10 However, the strength of generic convention is such that the receiver does not always need to be in possession of all the relevant data in order to understand what is communicated. Often mere knowledge of the genre is sufficient. On first viewing the sketch I, a Scandinavian, was not aware that Alberta is a province in Canada stereotypically characterized as a province of cowboys and oil—with too much money, too many rednecks and too little learning. Even so, because the sketch used the regional stereotype of the redneck to characterize Alberta, I hardly needed to look up "Albertans, popular depictions of" in order to figure that much out.

play of different generic structures within it—even if we have never used an expression like "generic structure" in our lives.

GENRE INTERPRETATION IN COMPLEX GENRES

As we move from these simple examples to more complex ones, it will come as no surprise that fitting a given text into a genre becomes more and more difficult, and that the generic patterns involved become increasingly complex. However, the tacit interpretative interchanges between reader and genre persist into the more advanced cases. Indeed, in such cases the task of much scholarly interpretation becomes simply to make explicit what has in fact already been communicated tacitly. This may well be one of the great advantages of generic interpretation. By focusing on the relationship between an utterance and the kinds of utterances that it is involved with, or that have been shaping it, we highlight a central point in the communication between utterance and receiver: the textual or cultural knowledge that is assumed by the text to be known. This enables us to see what the text does with the assumed cultural knowledge, how it repeats it, reinterprets it, twists it, or develops it into something new: either a new utterance within an existing genre, or a work of such complexity as to deny any simple attribution to a genre.

The distinction between these two usages of genre runs along lines parallel to those between rhetorical and literary genres outlined in the article "Genre and Rhetoric." While obviously there is no hard and fast rule here, generally speaking the closer one gets to utterances determined by recurrent, rhetorical situations, the more the new utterance will resemble former utterances aimed at parallel situations, while the farther one moves away from them, the more the text will utilize established generic patterns in unique ways. Nevertheless, this uniqueness must still be understood in the light of the generic types in play within the text. As is evident in Bakhtin's distinction between primary and secondary speech genres (1952-1953/1986, pp. 61-62), complex utterances will always be composed of a

number of different generic patterns combined into a larger whole. Our culturally conditioned common-sense understanding of these plays a major role in our interpretation of the work.

To work with generic interpretation, however, one needs considerably more precise concepts than the fuzzy logic involved in common-sense understandings of genres. We cannot meaningfully hope for exhaustive and precise definitions of individual genres, much less for a coherent genre system, as is amply demonstrated by Genette (1979/1992) and Fowler (1982), among others.[11] Nevertheless, the dramatic development taking place within genre studies in the last decades has given us a vastly better understanding of what genres actually are, and how they work within cultures and within utterances. This improved understanding should enable us to work with generic interpretation with considerable precision.

APPROACHES TO GENRE INTERPRETATION

There are many valid approaches to this subject, since widely differing forms of generic interpretation will emerge depending on how one combines and develops existing theories. In the limited space available here, it will be impossible to make anything like a meaningful survey of the possibilities. Instead, I shall sketch one possible approach to generic interpreta-

11 The impossibility of describing a coherent genre hierarchy does not mean that discussion of genre hierarchies is pointless. Not only do such genre hierarchies play an important part in everyday uses of genre—"Oh yes, I do like crime fiction, but I always prefer hardboiled stories, and I can't stand whodunnits"—but the rise of new genres and the decline of others can be very important cultural shifts. The rise of the movie is an example in point. 150 years ago, the genre was technically impossible; today it is present everywhere, and easily rivals literature in cultural importance. Thus, for instance, a literary critic unfamiliar with the Star Wars-films would often be at a disadvantage in reading literature from recent decades. From both an historical and a theoretical point of view, the deliberations on genre systems in Russian formalism (Duff, 2003; Tynyanov, 2000; 2003) are most enlightening despite the quixotic nature of any attempt at a coherent and comprehensive rendering of actual genre systems.

tion. What I am about to propose does not pretend to be a "system" of generic interpretation, nor is it a method in any strict sense of the word. Indeed, Prince may very well be right in claiming that "the inability to produce a theory of genre may be part and parcel of genre's advantage as a theory of interpretation." (2003, p. 452). Rather, the concepts described here join—along with the relationships among them—to form a heuristic tool for generic interpretation, whose primary value lies in its conceptual open-endedness and the ease with which it interacts with a broad variety of utterances and genres. A central point is that the concepts described here posit an isomorphy between genre and utterance, since not only the broader spectrum of a genre but also the individual utterance itself can be conceptualized in these terms. This allows for ready comparison between an utterance and the genres or generic structures with which it is related; and that, in turn, opens up consideration of how the utterance repeats, how it uses, and how it deviates from them.

In discussing why genres matter in literary studies, Pavel (2003) ties the role of genres in interpretation to the role of genres in the production of a work:

> Genre is a crucial interpretive tool because it is a crucial artistic tool in the first place. Literary texts are neither natural phenomena subject to scientific dissection, nor miracles performed by gods and thus worthy of worship but fruits of human talent and labor. To understand them, we need to appreciate the efforts that went into their production. Genre helps us to figure out the nature of a literary work because the person who wrote it and the culture for which that person labored used genre as a guideline for literary creation (2003, p. 202).

Susceptible as this description is to a charge of committing the intentional fallacy, and even though it runs the risk of reducing the work of art to a result of craftsmanship on the part of the artist, it nonetheless makes an

important point. A work of literature—and by extension any cultural utterance—does not arise or exist in closed confinement, but in constant interchange with the surrounding culture into which the utterance is embedded. What is more—and this is an intertextual point as much as a generic one—in order for an utterance to be understandable at all, it must draw on cultural and textual codes already known to those who are supposed to decipher it; otherwise nothing is communicated. This obviously does not mean that the utterance is merely a function of its cultural context, and cannot add anything to it. (In fact, every utterance probably does make additions of this kind, however local or fleeting they might be.) What it does mean is that meaning-making does not take place in an interpretative vacuum. Just as genres are an important part of culture, so too do they play an important part in any interpretation—tacit or otherwise—of cultural utterances.

STRUCTURES OF EXPECTATION

This brings us to Jauss' concept of the *horizon of expectation* inherent in genres. This concept has been given a number of different names in later works on genre theory. Seitel (2003) calls it the "framework of expectation" (p. 293); Frow (2006) uses the same terms, but adds "*structure of* ***implication***" (p. 9). There are important shifts of emphasis in the changed terminology as the hermeneutical presuppositions inherent in Jauss' term (recalling the central place of the concept of the horizon in Gadamer (1990)) is considerably subdued in Seitel and Frow.[12] The fundamental point for generic interpretation, however, remains the same. In Seitel's words, genres exist as "multidimensional frameworks of expectation shared by a speaker or writer and an audience" that "assist the audience in

12 Also the concept is present, though subdued, in Hirsch (1967), where it is described as a "system of expectations" (p. 78) shared by the speaker and interpreter of an utterance. The word "system" is used in a somewhat unsystematic meaning, and the concept as Hirsch uses it is closer to Jauss (1982) than to structuralist notions. Obviously, Gadamer (1960/1990) might be the common source.

following the development of the utterance on all dimensions, providing rules of thumb about plot, style, and theme, even if the expectations are addressed by ironically overturning them." (2003, p. 230). Leaving aside Seitel's focus on the speaker or writer—which is not of paramount importance in the present context, as I am dealing with the interpretation of utterances rather than with their production—a number of highly variable expectations are clearly present in any genre, and these expectations govern how we interpret them. In the words of Jauss:

> The new text evokes for the reader (listener) the horizon of expectations and "rules of the game" familiar to him from earlier texts, which as such can be varied, extended, corrected, but also transformed, crossed out or simply reproduced. Variation, extension, and correction determine the latitude of a generic structure; a break with the convention on the one hand and mere reproduction on the other determines its boundaries. (1982, pp. 88-89)

Jauss moves one step further than Seitel in making the transformation of genre an inherent part of the relationship between genre and utterances. His point is demonstrated in Fowler's delightful example of genre change by omission:

> There was a young lady of Crew
> Whose limericks stopped at line two. (1982, p. 172)

Fowler presents the "limerick" in passing, but it bears closer scrutiny. The limerick is of course a strongly regulative genre giving not only a fixed metric form but also a rather narrow range of (preferably naughty) subject matter and some indication as to what goes where in the poem (a person and a location in the first line, a bawdy pun in the last). Fowler's example, however, is not a "fünf Zeilen umfassendes Gedicht mit dem Reimschema

aabba," ["a five-line poem with rhyme scheme AABBA."] (Reitz, 2009, p. 480) and thus, formally speaking, not a limerick at all—as it breaks with the usual metrical form of the limerick by leaving out the last three lines. However, a reader familiar with the limerick will so strongly expect three more lines that it might take a while before he realizes that this *is* in fact the complete poem (it happened to me, and I have seen it happen to others). The theme of the limerick in itself is not interesting; but combined with the reader's expectation of three more lines, it creates a pun no less effective than those usually found within the genre. So the understanding of what is original in the text is only available to someone who has the standard five-line form of the limerick within his horizon of expectation, and even though the text here *is not* formally speaking a limerick its interplay of form and theme is only possible and only understandable due to the strength of the original genre. The genre is subverted, transformed *and* confirmed at the same time.

The regulative force of the horizon of expectation is usually tacit. When we see a headline on a billboard in a street, we know without thinking that it refers to a story in a newspaper, and so to a newspaper that can be bought on the inside of the shop next to the billboard. We also have very clear expectations as to what constitutes "news" in a headline. Things may have happened recently and so be new, but they do not count as news unless there is also some degree of urgency, drama or importance connected to them (see also Frow, 2006, pp. 6-10). These tacit assumptions can be made conscious at any moment, especially so if the utterance in question somehow deviates from the expectations we have of the genre—for example, by "ironically overturning them."

The strength of the structure of anticipation has been evident in the examples already given. The only reason we know that the purpose of the BMW commercial is to sell us a car is because we expect a commercial to make an attempt at selling us something. And this expectation is evident in the commercial itself, precisely in its avoidance of any explicit effort to

sell the viewer a car. The communication is flawless, even though what is communicated is not mentioned in the utterance itself.

WORLD

An equally central role in interpretation is played by a genre's *world*. Once again, Seitel's description is admirable:

> A genre presents a social world or a partial view of one that includes configurations of time and space, notions of causality and human motivation, and ethical and aesthetic values. Genres are storehouses of cultural knowledge and possibility. They support the creation of works and guide the way an audience envisions and interprets them. The idea of generic worlds directs a genre-savvy critic to the dimensions of these collective representations—including time, space, categories of actors and settings, causality, and motivation—and the interpretation they call for. (2003, p. 279)

This concept is of course debatable, and it becomes even more so when Frow (2006) defines it as "a schematically reduced version of the 'real' world" (p. 155). Yet it is also an enlightening critical tool. Things considered acceptable within one genre—light sabers, FTL-jumps in hyperspace, and strange force powers—are wholly unacceptable within another. Things considered morally acceptable within one genre, such as beating up prisoners or making lewd suggestions to members of the opposite (or the same) sex, are inappropriate within others. Discursive practices that are commonplace within opera—like expressing your feelings in ten minute arias—look somewhat curious when performed during a job interview. "World" is the concept with which Frow attempts to coordinate all of these different features of genre. What is most significant in Frow's subsequent comparison of a genre's world to "the 'real' world" is that there will always be some sort of discrepancy between the two, at least in scope. Thus

in characterizing the world of a genre we are essentially characterizing what makes this genre stand out in comparison to other kinds of utterance.

Interestingly, one of the first times Frow (2006) uses the concept "world" is in connection with a concrete utterance, rather than a genre (p. 7).[13] Following this, we may use the word "world" on three different levels in interpretation. First we have the real world, or as Frow puts it, paraphrasing the early Wittgenstein, "the sum of everything that there is." (p. 7) (In this specific context, our reservations toward a concept this broad and vague are of little or no importance.) Then we have the world of the genre as described by Seitel, followed by the world of the concrete utterance. Let us call these "w1" (the real world), "w2" (the world of the genre), and "w3" (the world of the concrete utterance). The interplay between these three "worlds" is multilayered and complex, and cannot be boiled down to w2 and w3 being a "schematically reduced" version of w1. Because every utterance adds to the sum of everything that there is, w1 is changed, even if ever so slightly, with each utterance. What is more, w3 cannot be a simple instantiation of w2, as it will—to a greater or lesser degree—add elements of its own that are not derived from w2. Finally, many utterances will manifest, contain, or relate to different generic structures, and so will form a w3 widely different from, though involved with, the worlds of the respective genres involved.

THEME-FORM-RHETORIC

A third useful tool in generic interpretation is John Frow's re-synthesis of rhetorical and literary theories of genre into the triad theme-form-rhetoric. Frow (2006) identifies itself as an "Introduction" to genre theory and has distinct introductory features (though not the one of being easily read). Like other volumes in the *New Critical Idiom* series it is, however, also more than an introduction as it contains a number of distinct and original

13 "World" is mentioned as a genre concept in the introduction in this volume (p. xiv, xvi).

claims about genre theory. In one of the book's most productive parts, Frow distinguishes these three aspects of genre. "Theme" is what is being said in the genre, "form" is how it is being said, and "rhetoric" is how the genre communicates with its receiver. While at first glance this seems a fairly simple way to describe genre, Frow makes two important additional points about the relationship among theme, form and rhetoric: first, that at any given time each of the three may function as the central concept, subordinating the other two as functions of itself; and second, that at any given point where one of the three is present, each of the other two will always be included.

Frow's use of the concept "rhetoric" must be distinguished from uses of the same term in other contexts. Here rhetoric is defined not as persuasion or effective communication, but much more as interchange between the utterances within a genre and the surrounding culture. This communication is not extrinsic to the genre, but is an inherent part of it: it arises in the interplay between the structure of expectation connected to the genre and what is actually uttered.

While Frow's triadic account does incorporate a rhetorical understanding of genres as formalized responses structured on recurrent situations as derived from Miller (1984), it deemphasizes the fundamental concept of the exigence and the corresponding focus on the rhetorical situation of genres. For this reason, Frow gives the thematic and formal structures in genres equal weight with the rhetorical. Frow thus fuses a literary and a rhetorical approach.[14]

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14 Frow is not alone in this synthesizing endeavor. Crossing over into the Millerian Fields we find Todorov already waiting for us: "like all other speech acts genres arise from the codification of discursive properties" (1978/1990, p. 20), several years before Miller's seminal article. Even the Arch Critic himself is here: Approaching the subject from a different angle, Fowler (1982) historicizes his own work by accepting some of the central notions of rhetorical genre scholarship: "Abandoning the notion of genres as fixed classes, criticism moved on in the 1980s and 1990s to discussing them as coded structures or matrices for composition and interpretation. Perhaps now it is time to move on again, and to think of genres as fields of association like those in actual situations of utterance" (Fowler, 2003, p. 190).

Examining a work from the assumption that it constitutes a unity of thematic and formal structures has long been a stable and accepted practice in literary scholarship. Even if raising this approach to the level of genre is a little less common, the generic level has previously played an important role in numerous studies—as where the generic concept of the "poem" is the defining focus in Cleanth Brooks' well known protest against "The Heresy of Paraphrase" (1975, p. 157).

Any such approach, however, requires some sort of recourse to the surrounding cultural environment. This is needed in order to show how texts presume that certain things are known to the reader—and then use that knowledge to communicate with him. Indeed, the originality of a work often lies in how it utilizes the reader's established assumptions in order to undermine, to twist, or, for that matter, to reinforce these very assumptions. In critical studies, for example, much energy has been devo-ted to showing how a text's value lies precisely in its nonconformity with established standards. But this immediately moves the text into the realm of genericity: one cannot very well discuss the relationship of a text to its preexisting cultural landscape without having recourse to concepts of genre. Thus even an interliterary point of view is dependent on the rhetorical dimensions of genre.

EMBEDDED GENRE

Finally, in order to understand the role of genre in interpretation we must include the concept of the embedded genre. An important starting point for this is found in the distinction between primary and secondary speech genres. Bakhtin notes that when primary genres are embedded in secondary genres, they lose their original generic character; they can only be understood if they are interpreted in accordance with their new context in the secondary genre. What takes place here is what we might call a generic recontextualization: the primary genre has been taken out of its original context and placed in another. Bakhtin's primary genres are simple utter-

ances defined by *not* including other genres in the utterance, so in fact many if not most embedded genres are not primary genres but secondary genres in their own right, embedding other genres in themselves, building complex, many layered structures.

The fundamental point of the embedded genre is that it carries its world—its structure of expectation and its relationship between form, rhetoric and theme—into the new context, thus adding meaning to it. A modest example could be the embedding of a letter in the context of a novel. If we look at the genre "letter" as such, it is a non-fiction genre that presupposes a letter writer and a reader, such that the letter writer has written (or at least has approved or dictated) the words in the letter with the aim that the reader should receive the physical (or at least electronic) object called "a letter" and peruse its content. However, if the letter in question is embedded in a novel, none of these things apply. The letter is a piece of fiction; it is not written by any writer other than the novel's author, and especially not by the person named as its sender, inasmuch as that person does not exist as anything but a fiction and thus is utterly unable to write anything. As the same applies for the reader of the letter, it is clear that the letter is not written for the perusal of the person named as its recipient, but rather for the perusal of the anonymous (but real) person or persons who will actually read it—not the letter as such, that is, but the novel. Moreover, though the text of the letter does exist as words on paper, it does not exist as an object or as a separate entity. The usual boundaries, the edge of the paper or (again) the frames of the e-mail, are not present, at least not in all but a few examples. Instead the letter-in-the-novel is typically surrounded by an open line on either side, above which the novel arrives at the letter and beneath which the novel proceeds from it. Hence the framing of the letter-in-the novel is quite different, and the paratext for it in relation to the novel is minimal.

All the same, it bears witness to the interpretative power of genre that the latter half of the preceding paragraph borders on silliness. Only a mor-

on would not know that a fictive letter does not exist outside of the fiction; not being able to make that sort of distinction would be an almost insurmountable social handicap. Thus the denial of the reality of the letter and the people surrounding it is an issue only on one level of analysis, where the letter is analyzed as a real-life object. As soon as we step inside the fictive frame of the novel, all of this changes radically. While the details will vary from case to case, in general the embedded genre, the letter, will recover all of the properties it had lost in the generic recontextualization as soon as it is interpreted within the diegetic frame given by the novel. Now the fictive letter once again has a writer and a reader; it is a non-fictional document written by the writer for the purpose of perusal by the reader; and it is clearly framed to the point where nobody would lift an eyebrow (except, of course, to frown at the bad writing) from reading a sentence like this in a novel: "The rosy form and pink color of the letter in the mailbox told him at once that this had to be from Margaret." Indeed, the letter is so real within the diegesis that even if we never hear a word of its content, or see it, but only learn of its existence through other means, the letter-in-the-novel is perceived as real—in the novel.

An embedded genre, however, need not be anything so clear cut as a letter quoted in a novel. Most of the genre structures embedded in a work do very little to draw attention to themselves. A work can pass through such genres as "conversation," "discussion," "date," "promise," "argument," "interview," etc., without any noticeable shift of discourse or enunciative position. Put more precisely, there are of course shifts, strictly speaking, of discourse and enunciative positions here; but these shifts are an integrated part of the original genre's form of discourse, and do not constitute a break with it. Everyone knows that one can, in conversation, cite another argument or verdict without anyone's taking conscious notice of the presence of these new genres. But that is because the embedding of utterances belonging to another genre is an intrinsic generic trait of conversation.

GENRE AND UTTERANCE

Let me return to a point I made earlier: that the same concepts can be used in the interpretation of a genre and in the interpretation of an utterance. This means that in generic interpretation, we may say that what we are dealing with is, for example, the relationship between the thematic, formal and rhetorical structure of the utterance, on one hand, and the thematic, formal and rhetorical structure of the generic patterns involved, on the other. This relationship is so manifold that there are no hard and fast rules governing how this interchange takes place. The most unexpected combinations may occur. Thus we may laud the formal mastery of an artist who deliberately renders a genre poorly in order to achieve some other goal. Take, for instance, the rule-abiding though inept singing of the artistic pedant Sixtus Beckmesser in Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1868). This song fits the opera in form, theme and rhetoric (doing musical parody in a comic opera) and it demonstrates the personality of Beckmesser. He knows the rules (the "Tabulatur") perfectly, but he has nothing in the way of artistic expression or originality to make it come alive—matching his arrogant, obtuse and pedantic character. In this way, by embedding an inane version of a *Meister*-song, Wagner actually just employs the generic possibilities of the comic opera as a whole.

If we approach generic interpretation from this point of view, we will see, first of all, that it draws attention to a number of usually tacit points in the interpretation of an utterance; and, second and along the same lines, that what we do in generic interpretation is often not so much to discover anything new about the utterance in question as to make explicit what we already know about it. It is a consequence of the nebulous character of genre definitions that every time a generic structure is brought into play in the interpretation of an utterance, it must to be reinterpreted in order to

grasp its role in the current context.[15] Thus as soon as we must connect a genre and an utterance, we find ourselves in the middle of an interpretation. We cannot just say that it "belongs" to this genre; but Derrida's claim that the correct relationship would be one of "participation without belonging" (1980, p. 9) is even less valid. Empirically speaking, the relationship between genres and utterances is far too complex to be described in any such simple terms. In almost all cases, moreover, the genres as we know them are far too fuzzy to allow for such a thing as a law of genre—even if this law is to be broken or bastardized.

Thus it is an inherent feature of the relationship between genre and utterance that the utterance will always display some sort of singularity, and is never simply a specimen of the genre. Even Jauss (1982), who actually regards some inferior works as simple specimens of the genre, grants that they do add new material to the old form, even if they do nothing else (p. 89).[16] Hence in interpreting the utterance in the light of its genre, one must understand its singular relation to the genre. No two utterances that are nominally of the same genre have the exact same relation to it. Even being

15 Thus when Morson (2003) remarks that "each member of a genre becomes both a work in itself and a particular development of the genre's resources" (Morson, 2003, p. 411), a parallel point could be made about the embedding of a genre within a larger work. Each example becomes both a unique case and a special application of the embedded genre's resources. However, changing the embedded genre's framing and context also changes the embedded genre itself. Compare, for instance, the very different genre renderings given in Müller (2009) and von Stackelberg (2009). The letter appears to be quite different thing when viewed as a separate genre than when it is regarded as a building block for the epistolary novel.

16 See also R. Cohen: "Each member alters the genre by adding, contradicting, or changing constituents, especially those of members most closely related to it" (1986, p. 204), and C. Guillén: "A proexistent form can never be simply 'taken over' by the writer or transferred to a new work. The task of form-making must be undertaken all over again. The writer must begin once more to match matter to form, and to that end he can only find a very special sort of assistance in the fact that the fitting of matter to form has already taken place. To offer this assistance is the function of genre" (2000, p. 36).

very firmly placed within known definitions of the genre can be an anomaly if the generic norm is to deviate strongly from any given norm for the genre. Thus whereas typical sonnets or typical doctor-patient conversations are very common within their respective genres, it is highly atypical for there to be a typical short story, as the norm in that case allows for, and indeed encourages, great variation.

Some of this generically determined singularity can be exemplified in the complex interplay between w1, w2 and w3 in J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980). Much has been made of its narrator (Phelan (1994)) and of its simultaneous narration (Cohn, 1999, p. 96-108), internal focalization of awareness (Damsteegt, 2005), and present-tense narration (DelConte, 2007), and rightfully so; but the unique world created in the novel is equally important. It rests firmly within the structure of expectation for the novel that we, as readers, will receive enough information to make the presented world seem real to us. This does not imply that the world in question has to be realistic; both science fiction and fantasy novels can go to great lengths in order to make an imagined world seem real. *Waiting for the Barbarians*, however, does the opposite thing. All of the elements involved in building the world, horses, an empire, a village, glasses, runes, bureaucracy, etc., are well known from w1, but in the w3 of the novel they are presented in such a way as to make them strange: The geography of the novel is unrecognizable, the technological level is hard to guess and there is no identifiable historical society to match the one described by Coetzee. Thus the world in *Waiting for the Barbarians* wholly relies both on things well known from w1 and on a well-known structure of expectation connected to the w2 of the novel genre. By reorganizing the elements into a new w3, however, *Waiting for the Barbarians* effects a displacement of time and place that aims at an *Entfremdung* of the reader, and perhaps also (though a closer argument would be needed to establish this) works to make other, more well-known aspects of the w3 (anthropological, political and existential aspects), stand out more clearly.

The intricate interplay between generic and individual structure becomes even more evident when embedded genres are taken into consideration. Since every more complex utterance is built up not only of utterances from primary speech genres, but also of layers upon layers of complex utterances from secondary speech genres, it is invariably both heavily dependent upon established generic structures and unique in its precise generic mold. One film will pass from a meeting to an argument, a doctor's appointment, and a press briefing, and then on to a wedding, a debate and another argument. And all of these genres could very well fit within the first ten minutes of the film. Another film might spend its first ten minutes in an entirely different manner. It could start out with an investigation, and move from there to an interrogation, a discussion, an analysis, a search (for a purloined letter?) and a revelation. Each of these embedded genres will in turn contain utterances belonging to several different genres. From this angle, it becomes clear that no two medium-sized works have the exact same generic structure. All the same, the tacit character of much genre knowledge means that we usually draw upon our understanding of these genres without even noticing it.

To return to one of this article's initial points: When we are engaged in generic interpretation, we are obviously dealing with features of an utterance that it shares with other utterances. We are dealing, in other words, with *kinds* of utterances. In fact, we cannot reasonably expect to comprehend the utterance if we do not understand the generic patterns that are involved in it. However, the farther we take such an interpretation, the clearer it will become that each utterance has a singular relation to these established generic patterns, and indeed that it recontextualizes each of them—thus changing and adding meaning to them—just as much as it draws meaning from them. In this way, interpreting what is generic in an utterance often turns out to be precisely the same thing as interpreting what is unique about it.

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Gorm Larsen, b. 1963, Ph.D, Associate Professor at Department of Communication, Aalborg University Copenhagen. He has for years studied and written on narratology and especially the act of narration in fiction in light of Bakhtin. Recently he has co-edited (2014) *Blink. Litterær analyse og metode* (Wink. Literary Analysis and Method). Currently he is doing research into shame and guilt in media and literature from a philosophical and social psychological point of view.

Palle Schantz Lauridsen, b. 1955, Ph.D., Associate Professor in Media Studies at the Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics, University of Copenhagen. Selected publications: (2014) *Sherlock Holmes i Danmark* (Sherlock Holmes in Denmark), (2013) "Verdens største show: Farver, formater og forstæder" (The World's Greatest Show: Colour, Format, and Suburbia), in: A. Halskov et al. (ed.) *Guldfeber* (Gold fever), (2011) "Welcome to fucking Deadwood—fortælling, sprog og krop i verdens vildeste western" (Narrative, Language, and Body in the World's Wildest Western), in: A. Halskov et al. (ed.) *Fjernsyn for viderekomne* (Advanced Viewers' Television).

Anders Juhl Rasmussen, b. 1979, Postdoc, Ph.D., in Danish literature at the Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics, University of Copenhagen. Selected publications: (2010) "Arenamodernisme. Udvidelser af romanens genrefelt" (Arena-modernism. Transformations of

the Novel), in: *Kritik 196* (Critique), (2012) Ph.D. thesis, *Arena-modernisme. En position i dansk litteratur* (Arena-modernism. A Position in Danish Literature), (2013) "Den produktive modsætning. Friedrich Nietzsche som opdrager for Peter Seeberg" (The Productive Contradiction. Friedrich Nietzsche as Educator of Peter Seeberg), in: *Edda 2*.

René Rasmussen, b. 1954, Associate Professor, Ph.D., in Danish literature at the Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics, University of Copenhagen. Selected publications: (2000) *Bjelke lige i øjet—om Henrik Bjelkes forfatterskab* (Bjelke Bull's-eye—on the Authorship of Henrik Bjelke), (2004) *Litteratur og repræsentation* (Literature and Representation), (2004), *Kognition—en liberalistisk ideologi* (Cognition—A Liberalistic Ideology), (2007) *Moderne litteraturteori 1-2* (Modern Theory of Literature 1-2), (2009) *Lacan, sprog og seksualitet* (Lacan, Language and Sexuality), (2010) *Psykoanalyse—et videnskabsteoretisk perspektiv* (Psychoanalysis—An Epistemological Perspective), (2012) *Angst hos Lacan og Kierkegaard og i kognitiv terapi* (Anxiety in Lacan and Kierkegaard and in Cognitive Therapy).

Anne Smedegaard, b. 1977, MA in Danish and Philosophy, Ph.D. fellow at the Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics University of Copenhagen. Selected publications: (2013) "Hvem sagde hvorfor? Skolegenrers situationelle og kognitive forankring" (Who Said Why? Situated and Cognitive Embedded School Genres), in: *Viden om læsning 13* (Knowledge on Reading). (In progress) "Student and Teacher Constructions of the 'Generic Contract' in Upper Secondary School Essays".

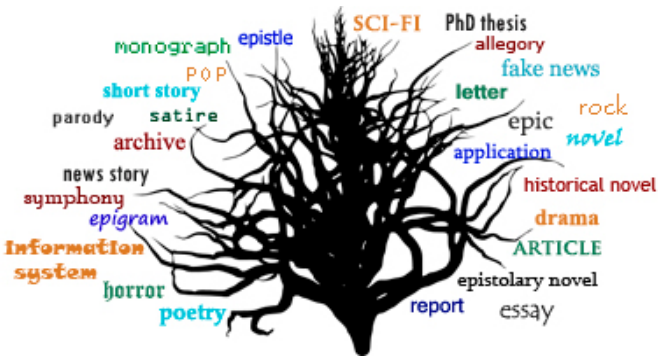
Christel Sunesen, b. 1981, BA in Rhetoric, MA in Danish at the Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics, University of Copenhagen. Selected publications: (2008) "Fortalens retorik—fra Arrebo til Oehlen-

schläger" (The Rhetoric of the Preface—from Arrebo to Oehlenschläger), in: *Danske Studier* (Danish Studies), (2014, editor) *OEHL #1—Antologi for ny dansk litteratur* (OEHL #1—Anthology of New Danish Literature), (2014) "Grundtvig og rimbrevet" (Grundtvig and the Verse Epistle) in: *Ved lejlighed. Grundtvig og genrerne* (co-editor with Sune Auken).

Erik Svendsen, b. 1954, Associate Professor at the Department of Culture and Identity, Roskilde University (RUC). Selected publications: (1996) *Kieslowskis kunst* (The Art of Kieslowski), (1998) *Det Nye. Sonderinger i dansk litterær modernisme* (The New. Exploring Danish Literary Modernism), (1999, editor) *Detaljen. Tekstanalysen og dens grænser* (The Detail. Textual Analysis and its Limits), (2000, editor) *Ud af det moderne. Den kritiske tanke anno 2000* (Beyond of the Modern. Critical Thinking Around the Year 2000), (2007) contribution to *Dansk Litteraturs Historie. 1960-2000* (Danish Literary History. 1960-2000), (2011, editor) *Litterære livliner. Kanon, klassiker, litteraturbrug* (Literary Lifelines. Canon, Classic, and the Use of Literature), (2015) *Kampe om virkeligheden. Tendenser i dansk prosa 1990-2010* (Fights on Reality. Tendencies in Danish Prose 1990-2010), (2015, co-editor) Radioverdener (Radio Worlds).

Ib Ulbæk, b. 1955, Associate Professor, Ph.D., in Danish language at the Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics, University of Copenhagen. Selected publications: (1989) Ph.D. thesis, *Evolution, sprog og kognition* (Evolution, Language, and Cognition), (2001) "Pipelines and Pipelining: a Theoretical Discussion of a Concept to Explain Coherence Between Paragraphs", in: L. Degand (ed.) *Multidisciplinary Approaches to Discourse*, (2005) *Sproglig tekstanalyse: Introduktion til pragmatisk tekstanalyse* (Linguistic Text Analysis: An Introduction to Pragmatic Text Analysis).

RESEARCH GROUP FOR GENRE STUDIES (RGGS)



The Research Group for Genre Studies moves at the forefront of existing genre research, with a wide international network, a developing interdisciplinary research profile in both English and Danish, and extensive teaching activities at all levels, including a strong profile in research education.

RGGS embraces the highly developed research in current Genre Studies. At the core of this research is the advanced, remarkably cohesive, and extensive body of knowledge established in Rhetorical Genre Studies, in English for Specific Purposes, and in Systemic Functional Linguistics. The field now spans important work within Rhetoric, Composition, Linguistics, Sociology, Ethnography, Business Communication, Composition and Information Studies.

RGGS seeks to develop and expand this research by examining and challenging its theoretical underpinnings, by expanding its scholarly reach, and by reintegrating a number of subjects into Genre Studies that have been left behind in the development of current Genre Studies. Specifically, RGGS strives to establish a cohesive connection between aesthetic and functional theories of genre, in order to **reinvigorate** the study of genre in aesthetic research fields, and the inclusion of aesthetic subjects in Genre Studies.